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Imprisoned Fathers - Responding to Children

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Imprisoned fathers - responding to children

“In many ways I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence, both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole ... is one that no government can fill.” (Barack Obama in Davies, 2009:8)

Many have commented on the invisibility of fathers in the area of child and family welfare in research, policy and practice (e.g. see Brown et al., 2009). This special edition of *Child Care in Practice* focuses on a much-overlooked issue in child and family scholarship: responding to the needs of children whose fathers are imprisoned.

In recent decades, we have seen growing recognition of the important role played by fathers in their children's lives and subsequently, the impact of absent fathers. It is now generally accepted that fathers have an important, and separate, role to play in children's lives and have a significant influence on how children grow and develop into adulthood (Fletcher et al., 2014; Heurta et al., 2013). Contemporary discourse encourages fathers to be 'hands-on' in their parenting, promoting displays of men cuddling, playing and feeding their children (Brown et al., 2009). Yet, there seems to be little guidance on how to achieve this state, particularly for those fathers who face challenges across a range of life domains, and perhaps need most help. There has also been a growing recognition that the term father should not just refer to those that are the biological fathers of children but should also include non-biological social and legal relationships, such as adoptive fathers, stepfathers, social fathers (i.e. where a man has assumed responsibility for a child), as well (see Marsiglio et al., 2000).

The corollary of the present, active, good father, is the bad, absent father. Our understanding of what has become known as 'father absence' is, in many ways, limited in focus. McLanahan and colleagues (2013) provide evidence of the negative impact of father absence on children's school completion, social-emotional adjustment and their mental health as adults. However, this research only focused on father absence arising from parental divorce/separation or father absence from birth. Less is known about father absence arising from imprisonment and the specific needs of imprisoned fathers and their children. McLanahan and colleagues (2013) also note that much research in this area has found it difficult to disentangle what causes the negative impacts of father absence from the circumstances that led to the father's absence and how these effects may intersect. If we consider parental incarceration as a very specific type of father absence, which typically co-occurs alongside other personal and structural issues, including substance abuse, mental health, family violence, poor education and employment, then it seems highly likely that these intersecting issues will create an even more negative impact on children.

Often, the impact of parental imprisonment on children is overshadowed in the minds of the general public and policymakers by the criminal status of the imprisoned father and focus on the father's offending behaviour. This is unfortunate as not only does it not consider how imprisonment can result in negative harms for innocent children but it also fails to appreciate how parental imprisonment may increase the risk of these children becoming involved in antisocial behaviour and crime in the future (Murray et al., 2012; Besemer et al., 2011). Greater attention needs to be paid to this area as we

continue to imprison more people throughout the world, increasing the number of children that are affected by parental imprisonment.

Parental Imprisonment

In 2016, over 11 million people were believed to be imprisoned throughout the world, with the world prison population growing at a faster rate than the world's general population (20% compared to 18%) (Walmsley, 2016). While exact figures on the number of children affected by parental imprisonment are not available (as these statistics are not routinely collected by criminal justice authorities), estimates suggest that "probably tens of millions of children around the world" are affected by parental imprisonment (Robertson, 2007: 8). The vast majority of those imprisoned are men, with over 93% of those imprisoned globally identifying as male (Walmsley, 2016). Consequently, this special issue is focusing on the issues of imprisoned fathers as the vast majority of parents imprisoned are fathers.

It is important to note, however, that not all groups experience imprisonment equally. Some groups are more likely to be imprisoned than others, with minority groups and lower socio-economic groups being especially likely to be imprisoned (Tonry, 1997; Wacquant, 2009). Moreover, jurisdictions differ in their birth rate, with Africa and some parts of Asia and Oceania reporting above average global birth rates, while other areas such as Europe, North America, South America, Australia and New Zealand report below average global birth rates (United Nations, 2016). These figures suggest that some groups and some jurisdictions are more likely to be affected by parental imprisonment than others. In addition, large scale, quantitative studies have found that parental imprisonment can have significant long-term social, economic, behavioural and psychological consequences for children but that these effects can vary between different jurisdictions, depending on the availability of social supports, the wider political and economic context and the conditions of imprisonment in a particular jurisdiction (Wildeman, 2014; Besemer et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2007). The quality of father-child relationships prior to imprisonment and the extent to which family contact is maintained or restricted by criminal justice policies, practices and procedures can also influence the extent to which parental imprisonment can negatively impact on children (Dennison et al., 2017; Hutton, 2016; Sharrat, 2014).

This special issue seeks to add to our understanding of parental imprisonment by providing an in-depth exploration of how the arrest, detention and experiences of fathers during imprisonment can affect their ability to parent and meet the needs of their children. Contemporary scholarship from across the UK, Ireland, Norway, the US and Australia is drawn together to share and consolidate knowledge in this area, as well as stimulate debate, with the aim of furthering our understanding of how to effectively respond to the needs of imprisoned fathers and their children. This body of work also seeks to highlight the need for government policy and statutory welfare bodies to focus on the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment as a priority area and to recognise the importance of adopting a joined up, coordinated response to this issue.

The special issue begins with Bartlett and colleagues highlighting how the needs of children in Australia are often forgotten about at the point of parental arrest and how greater attention needs to be paid to how such arrests are conducted to ensure that children are not traumatised or left without care. Next, Tasca discusses how the experience of incarceration in the US may be transforming fatherhood and the role of fathers in the lives of their children. She examines how imprisonment can

disrupt fathers' ability to parent but also describes how, for some, prison visiting may provide an opportunity to interrupt existing patterns and improve father-child relationships. Following on from this, Parkes and Donson examine how the experience of visiting prison in Ireland has usually not been structured in such a way that considers the rights of children or their needs. They argue that prison visitation needs to respect children's rights and consider the impact of visitation on children. In attempting to maintain family relationships, prison based parenting programmes can often be used. The next three papers focus on programmes supporting fathers in three different jurisdictions. In Scotland, Buston and colleagues discuss the challenges that can be encountered in attempting to recruit, retain and engage young fathers in such a programme. Hayes and colleagues build on this to highlight the importance of such programmes providing opportunities for fathers to rehearse the new skills they are acquiring on such a programme in Northern Ireland, if they are to master these skills and use these skills to improve father-child relationships and meet the needs of their children. Similarly, Hansen examines such a programme in Norway, demonstrating how it can help improve fathers' parenting skills and father-child contact. He concludes, however, that such programmes are limited in their ability to help families with the wider economic and social challenges they face, unless there is a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to the needs of these children and families across the social welfare and criminal justice systems. Then, Boswell offers some personal reflections on why a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to the needs of children with imprisoned fathers has not been adopted in England and Wales. She points to a number of weaknesses in existing research (many of which can be seen in the studies included in this special issue), as well as a lack of official statistics and the politicisation of crime as contributing to the failure to adopt a coordinated, joined up approach to this issue. Lastly, a review of Madison Strempek's 'Everybody Makes Mistakes: Living with my Daddy in Jail' is provided. This book shares the thoughts and experiences of 10 year old Madison as she deals with the imprisonment of her father and illustrates how many children seek to maintain a deep and loving relationship with their father despite their imprisonment.

This special edition, therefore, seeks to draw attention to the needs of children with imprisoned fathers and contribute to consolidating knowledge, stimulating debate and focusing attention on addressing gaps and weaknesses in our knowledge so that we can increase the pressure on policymakers, politicians and statutory bodies to prioritise this issue and adopt a more coordinated, joined up approach to addressing the needs of these children.

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